

Why do heroes journey to the Underworld?

James Darnton

The *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, two of the most important epics ever written, both have their protagonists visit the Underworld. James Darnton asks why these visits are important, demonstrating that it is here that Odysseus and Aeneas come to terms with who they really are, with their ambition and their mortality. Not content to draw out superficial similarities between these narratives, James puts them next to *Gilgamesh* to show how the *Aeneid* in particular does things a little differently. His essay helps us read the text and perhaps too to find lessons pertinent to our lives within it.

Epic poems shape their heroes' development by sending them on a downward journey or '*katabasis*' beyond the earthly sphere into the Underworld. Unlike the legendary poet Orpheus, who makes the descent to retrieve his dead wife, or Hercules who kidnaps the hound of hell, the heroes of epic poetry journey not for loot or loved ones but for knowledge, a special knowledge akin to prophecy that helps them on their mission ahead. More than an entertaining plot-device, *katabasis* is rather a coming-of-age narrative that brings heroes Odysseus and Aeneas, and readers/listeners face to face with their mortality and alters their outlook forever. It is not just a journey of the body, but a journey of the mind.

Back to (kata-)basics

Katabasis has been an epic motif at least as far back as the Babylonian/Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh, unsettled by the death of his close friend Enkidu, travels the earth in a futile search for immortality. He must race through mountains that 'at sunrise and sunset guarded the sun' and across the ominous 'waters of death' to the edge of the world, inhabited by Uta-napishti, a proto-Noah who has himself been given eternal life. Whilst this land is not technically 'the netherworld', destination of the dead, it is a liminal region and, as such, can be regarded as a separate plane. The land's position, beyond 'sunrise and sunset' emphasises its existence outside of societal constraints. The theme of liminality is further emphasised by the crossing of 'the waters of death': the crossing of water

occurs frequently in depictions of the Underworld. In the *Odyssey*, *Aeneid*, and other Greek and Latin texts, Charon the ferryman transports souls from the land of the living across the Styx to the land of the dead, emphasizing entry to another dimension.

In book 11 of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus too must travel until he has 'crossed the river of Ocean' (out of the Mediterranean) to where Pyriphlegethon and Kokytus flow into Acheron. Here, he must sacrifice an ewe and 'an all black ram' in accordance with the 'nekyia' or rite by which souls were called up from the dead. It is not just geographically liminal, but temporally liminal: 'Pyriphlegethon' and 'Kokytus' translate into English as literally 'blazing' and 'shrieking', words used of the rage of the Achaeans charging at Troy and the wailing of its inhabitants. By recalling the Trojan war, such vocabulary drives back into Odysseus' past. In the Underworld, Odysseus' past recurs and confronts him as he meets Agamemnon and Achilles and Ajax, his former comrades.

For Aeneas in book 6 of the *Aeneid*, the Underworld is also liminal and forbidding: he travels down through a cave 'into what deep earth and darkness cover', to a place so unearthly that Virgil addresses its gods, asking them to 'Let me pass this tale on'. Aeneas, like Odysseus, has to sacrifice first, giving a 'sterile cow', 'black bullocks' and a 'black-fleeced lamb', before crossing the 'stygian swamp' to the Underworld proper. But Aeneas' Underworld focuses perhaps more on the future than on the past. For Aeneas the entrance to the Underworld lies not on the

edges of the world, but in what will become the centre of the Roman empire: on the west coast of 'elusive Italy', at Cumae. Whilst Odysseus travels away from the known world, back into his past, Aeneas travels *towards* his destiny – as the shade of his father, Anchises, tells him, 'There you will see your city and descendants' – to a day when Rome will be the 'caput', capital of the world.

Knowing one's place

The knowledge our protagonists receive does not consist of special powers, or even nuggets of data, but wisdom. Gilgamesh arrives in the Underworld tormented by the loss of Enkidu and the thought of his death, with his 'cheeks so hollow' and 'features burnt by frost and by sunshine', asking Uta-napishti 'Shall I not be like him [Enkidu] and also lie down, never to rise again, through all eternity?' Gilgamesh is driven to distraction by the thought of his own mortality, neglecting his rule over his people in Uruk and ditching civilization for wandering. Uta-napishti finally dispenses the wisdom promised in the first line of the poem: 'The country's foundation'. He tells of the 'great deluge' which he survived and for which he was granted immortality. Although Gilgamesh fails to win immortality for himself, he is made to appreciate the fortune of his life: Uta-napishti asks him to 'compare your lot with the fool' who gets 'left-over yeast instead of fresh ghee'. And when Gilgamesh leaves Uta-napishti, he is given robes 'fresh and new', and his 'matted locks' are made 'as clean as can be'. He is, in effect, reborn, and has gained the self-awareness predicted in the first lines of the poem, where he is described as 'He who saw the deep'. The boy prone to tantrums, who had abused his people and raped their wives, has ended up a hero who understands, and is grateful for his position. In the last line of the poem, he methodically adds up the area of Uruk, saying 'Three square miles and a half is Uruk's expanse'. Gilgamesh has come to terms with the world and its natural order and displays pride in the stewardship of his city – and all of this, in stark contrast to earlier where he was 'like a

wild bull'. This acceptance could only have come from 'the deep', since only there could he gain perspective across time and distance.

Aeneas' visit to the Underworld and the knowledge he finds there is similar to Gilgamesh's. Aeneas meets various figures there – not just his father, but lost comrades such as Palinurus and Deiphobus, and his former lover Dido. Having previously seen 'Tartarus itself', where wrongdoers are punished and 'writhe at the bottom' of the dank pit, Aeneas is shown the good part: the 'verdant flowing meadows' of the Elysian fields, where those who 'had been pure priests' or 'wounded fighting for their country' live. This 'afterlife' as opposed to 'after-death' is not explored in our earlier epics, and changes the approach to dying drastically. For Aeneas, the Underworld is a place of reward, as well as punishment. Aeneas' descendant, Virgil's patron, Augustus, was keen to restore '*pietas*' or piety to an empire riven by civil war. Virgil's Underworld takes a 'carrot and stick' approach, rewarding piety, and punishing '*furor*', a violent lack of self-control. Just as Aeneas is encouraged to lead an upright life, so, crucially, are Virgil's readers.

It is not just the knowledge of impending judgement that drives Aeneas on. It is the vision of impending Roman success that 'fired his lust for glory in the future'. The catalogue of Roman heroes gives him not just personal knowledge 'to endure or else avoid each hardship' against the Laurentian tribes, but an attachment to a public order with world-implications. These make Augustan Rome a pre-

ground as the most destitute serf ... than to be king over all the shadowy dead.' Achilles, who is more blessed than any other man, the man with more glory or '*kleos*' than the other Greeks, denies its importance, undermining the whole Homeric system of self-worth in the process. Death is something to be avoided at all costs for Odysseus. Perhaps this is what keeps him going when 'the sea had soak'd his heart through' – a will to survive no matter what.

Death is one of the key themes of epic, and it is in *katabasis* that the hero comes to terms with it. Although the specifics of the Underworld and the lessons it teaches are different in every case, its spatial and temporal liminality remains constant. This is why the hero must journey there: it is only in stepping outside, or beyond, lived experience that he, and we, can know his place in the world.

James Darnton studies at King Edward's School, Bath. Congratulations to him on winning the 2016 Gladstone Memorial Essay Prize, and to runner-up Luke Whittome for his lively essay on Augustus.

White-ground lekythos, c. 450 B.C., showing Hermes ushering the deceased towards Charon's boat for transportation to the Underworld. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art (www.metmuseum.org), Rogers Fund, 1921.

ordained regime and inspire the investment of all of its citizens.

In contrast, the knowledge that Odysseus receives in the Underworld is unsettling. Yes, he 'may reach Ithaca yet despite many hardships', but at what cost? Odysseus first meets Elpenor, his companion who died in a freak accident, who asks him to bury him 'So that people for generations to come may know of my story'. He is a character that can be linked to Palinurus in the *Aeneid*, who also dies in a needless way on the shores of Italy. Here we learn that death is indiscriminate and can strike at any time – Elpenor 'fell off head first' from a roof he was sleeping on. Later the story of Agamemnon's 'pitiful death' at the hand of his wife's lover, Aegisthus, reinforces the suddenness of death that can bring down the highest of men. But it is Achilles' words that are most famous: 'I would much rather be above